Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on April 5, 1998

in Plum Village, France.

The Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone

Dear Sangha, today is the fifth of April 1998. We are in the Upper Hamlet, in Spring Retreat. Now we have come to the liturgy for Thursday morning. It includes the Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone, and the Sutra on the Forty Verses or Ratnagunasamcaya. The Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone is called the Bhaddekaratta Sutta in Pali. It belongs to the Majjhima Nikaya 131.

"Knowing how to live alone" here does not mean to live in solitude, separated from other people, on a mountain in a cave. "Living alone" here means living to have sovereignty of yourself, to have freedom, not to be dragged away by the past, not to be in fear of the future, not being pulled around by the circumstances of the present. We are always master of ourselves, we can grasp the situation as it is, and we are sovereign of the situation and of ourselves. There are many places in the sutras where the Buddha says that "being alone" does not mean to be separated from other people. We can be sitting in a cave, but we are not necessarily alone, because we have lost ourselves in our thinking, so we are not alone. In the Majjhima Nikaya there are at least four sutras that talk about the subject of knowing how to live alone, and in the Madhyama Agama there are also sutras that talk about the subject of living alone. Therefore, we know that the subject of living alone is a very important subject in the teachings of the Buddha. We have to know how to do this, how to live in freedom, not being imprisoned by the future and not being carried away by things in the present.

The Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone teaches us how to live each moment of our daily life very deeply. When we can live our daily life deeply, we begin to have concentration and wisdom; we can see the true nature of life, and we arrive at a great freedom, and freedom is the essence of happiness. If we are suffering, it is because we are not free, and therefore to practice is to recover our freedom. When we have freedom, we will become solid. Freedom and solidity are the two characteristics of nirvana, so we need a program of freedom and solidity. If somebody is suffering, we know that person is not free; because they are not free, they are suffering, they are being imprisoned by the past, or they are being oppressed by the present, or they are being carried away by the future, and that is why they are suffering. The practice is to re-establish our freedom, and then we will no longer suffer, and our happiness will increase. The oldest writings on the better way to live alone, on how to live deeply in the present moment, are found in this sutra.

For example, someone hears the doctor say, "You have cancer, you may live for six months more." That person feels completely overwhelmed. The fear, the idea that I'm going to die in six months takes away all our peace and joy. Before the doctor told us that we had

cancer, we had the capacity to enjoy ourselves with our friends. However, once the doctor told us that, we lose all our capacity to sit and enjoy our tea, or enjoy our meal, or watch the moon, because we are so afraid of the moment when we will die. It takes away all our freedom. If you know that death is something that comes to everybody, you will not suffer so much. The doctor says we have six months left to live, but the doctor also will die. Maybe the doctor knows we have six months, but the doctor does not know how many months he himself has left to live. Maybe the doctor will die before us. Maybe driving home after the examination he will have an accident, and therefore the knowledge of the doctor isn't so great. He tells us we only have six months left. We may be lucky to live six months, because the doctor may die before us. So if we look deeply we see things, which if we don't look deeply we wouldn't see. Looking deeply we can get back our freedom from fear, and with that freedom, with our non-fear, we may live happily those six months.

All of us are equal as far as life and death are concerned: we are all going to die. So it is very equal—it will happen to everybody. Everyone has to die, but before we die, can we live properly? I am determined to live properly until I die. That is a very awakened thing to say. If we are going to die, then we have to live the best we can, and if we can live six months in the best way we can then the quality of that six months will be as if we were living for six years, or sixty years. If our life is filled with being caught in the fetters of suffering, then our life doesn't have the same kind of meaning as if we live in freedom. So knowing that we have to die, I am determined to live my life properly, deeply. All of us have to die, but if we are able to live with peace, joy, and freedom before we die, then we live as if we are dead already, even before we die.

First of all, the Buddha teaches us that we must struggle to get back our freedom, to be able to live the moments of our daily life deeply. In these moments of our daily life we can have peace, we can have joy, and we can heal the suffering we have in our bodies and in our minds. Living deeply at each moment of our life helps us to be in touch with the wonderful things of life, helps us to nourish our body and our mind with these wonderful elements, and at the same time helps us to embrace and transform the suffering that we have. So to live deeply in the present moment of every day of our life is to live a life of wonder, nourishment, and healing. Living like that we can revive our freedom, and live deeply: we give rise to the truth, we have awakened understanding, and our fears, our anxieties, our sufferings, and our sadness, will evaporate, and we will become a source of joy and life to ourselves and to those around us. According to Buddhism, that is the method of dwelling happily in the present moment. Looking carefully, we will see that this writing on knowing the better way to live alone is the oldest human writing about how to live the present moment, so it is a very important sutra. We should study it carefully, and then apply it in our lives and in the practice. We know that all the teachings related to the teachings on living in the present moment should be studied in the same way.

There was a monk whose name was Thera. His friends probably gave him the name Thera, which means "the elder." That monk liked to live on his own. He always went off on the alms round on his own. He liked to do walking meditation on his own. He like to eat on his own, he liked to wash his clothes on his own. He really liked to do everything on his own. He seemed to like to avoid his friends in the practice as much as possible. All the monks had heard the Buddha praising the better way to live alone, but the way the Buddha used the meaning of "living alone," he meant not to be imprisoned by the past, not to be pulled away by the future, and not to be carried away by what was happening in the present. The Buddha did not mean that living alone means to distance yourself and separate yourself

from your friends in the practice. Nevertheless, this monk liked to do things on his own, eating on his own, going to the town on his own, and avoiding other people. The other monks knew that he liked to do things alone, but they felt that there was something not quite right about this way of life. They felt that he wasn't really practicing according to the spirit of the Buddha's teachings. So the other monks went to the Buddha and they said, "Lord Buddha, one of our fellow practitioners called Thera, the elder, likes to do everything on his own: walking meditation, eating meditation, working on his own, and we don't know if living like that that is really truly living alone." And Buddha said, "Where is that monk? Ask him to come here and have a cup of tea with us." So the monks went and invited Thera to join them, and the Buddha said, "I hear you like to live alone. How do you live on your own? Please tell me." And Thera said, "Lord Buddha, I sit in meditation alone, I eat on my own, I wash my clothes on my own, I go into the village for alms on my own." And the Buddha said, "Oh, that is true, then you really do live alone. But maybe the way you live alone is not the best way to live alone, there is a better way to live alone." And then the Buddha recited a gatha: "If you live without being imprisoned by the past, not being pulled away by the future, not being carried away by the forms and images of the present moment, living each moment of your life deeply, that is the true way of living alone." When Thera heard this he knew that he had been living alone just as an outer form, and there was a deeper way to live alone.

The sutra where this story is told is called the Theranama Sutra, it is in the Samyutta Nikaya, and there is also an equivalent sutra in the Samyukta Agama, it is Number 71 in the Samyukta Agama. The essence of the sutra is a poem. The Buddha wrote poems, but the poems of the Buddha were more designed to show us how to practice. The gatha which talks about the art of living alone is called the Bhaddekaratta gatha, Bhaddekaratta means "the best way to live alone." Many people have mistranslated this title: One master translated it as "practicing for one night." There's also another master who translated this title as "being present." The correct translation is to say "The better way to practice living alone." This poem says:

Do not pursue the past.
Do not lose yourself in the future.
The past no longer is.
The future has not yet come.
Looking deeply at life as it is
in the very here and now,
the practitioner dwells
in stability and freedom.

All of the essence of the Buddha's teachings lies in these words. We know that stability and freedom are the two characteristics of nirvana, and that is the aim of our practice. The aim of our practice is that every moment of our daily life we can produce stability and freedom: walking, lying down, sitting, standing, we produce freedom and stability. Nirvana is something we can touch right in the present moment, not only with our mind, but also with our body. When our feet are walking in a leisurely way, solid and free, then our feet are touching nirvana. As soon as we have stability and freedom, nirvana is there. The level of freedom and stability tells us whether we have been able to touch nirvana deeply. Do not pursue the past. There are people who are tired of the present and think that the past was more beautiful, and that life was more beautiful before. They always think the past

was more beautiful. Therefore, they cannot see the happiness of the present. Many of us are caught in this way of thinking. The past is no longer there, and we compare it with the present, and we say that the past was more beautiful than the present; but even when we had those moments in the past we didn't really value them at the time, because in the past we were not able to live in the present moment. We were always running after the future, and now if we were taken back to the past, we would do the same. At that time life was more beautiful, the sun was brighter, the moon was brighter--those are words from a French song. There are people who pursue the past, not because they think the past was beautiful, but because the past has made them suffer, the past was a trauma, a heavy wound for them. We have suffered, we have been wounded, we have died in the past, and those heavy wounds are calling us back to the past, crying, "Come back here, come back to the past. I am the subject, you cannot escape me." That is what the past says to us. We are like sheep running back to the past, to enclose us, to imprison us, to make us suffer. The past is also a very great prison. We hear the words of the past, and we run back to the past, we refuse to live our life in the present moment, we are always going back to the past. So the Buddha says, "Don't pursue the past."

These are the words of our teacher: "Don't pursue the past." We should write a poem, how can we write a poem so we are able to do this? Sometimes we are sitting with our friend. Our friend is sitting there, but we feel abandoned by our friend, because our friend is drowning in the past. Our friend is sitting next to us, but our friend is not with us, our friend is imprisoned by the past. Our friend is there, but our friend is not really there. We know that we are sitting there, and we feel that our friend is not sitting there with us. So we find a way to free our friend from the past, and we say to our friend: "A penny for your thoughts. What are you thinking about? Tell me. I'll give you ten centimes if you tell me." That person may wake up, jump up and smile and be free from the prison of the past. If we are a monk or a nun, we should know how to do this. We should know the method of being able to release our friend in the practice who is imprisoned and drowning in the past. We have to use our love, our mindfulness, and our friendship, to help that person out of the prison of the past. If we are a monk or a nun, we should know how to use our brothers and sisters in the practice to help us get out of our prison of the past. Therefore, living in a Sangha has these kinds of benefits.

(bell)

The Sanghakaya helps us in every step. The Sanghakaya brings us out of our prison of the past. The Sanghakaya takes our hand and leads us step by step into the present, so that we develop the capacity to dwell peacefully in the present. The moment when we shave our head, the moment when our teacher sprinkles water of compassion on our head, that moment is the moment when we are reborn, born a second time. All the Sangha is present around us, with their palms joined, while the drops of compassionate water penetrate us. With the water which is sprinkled on the top of our heads, we become a new person at that moment. That moment is the moment when we die. We allow the past to die, and we allow the present to be born. Our teacher and the Sangha are bringing us into life, giving us a new soul, a new body, a precepts body, a Dharma body, and that precepts body, that Dharma body are protected by Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and precepts. There is no reason for us to fear, and there is no reason for us to feel isolated or alone. There is no reason for us to be worried about anything. There is no need for us to worry about all the things that have happened in the past, all the bitterness of the past.

We can kneel, we can close our eyes, join our palms, and visualize this moment with the water of compassion falling on our head, and we can see ourselves being born anew. Our teacher and the Sangha are transmitting to us our precepts body, and we have the duty to allow our teacher and the Sangha to lead us step by step on this new path. We see we are protected, we are secure, with security from the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and the precepts; and never before in our life have we felt as we feel at this moment. If we allow the Sangha to wake us up, if we allow our teacher to wake us up, we will see that we are in a state of security we have never been in before. If we live like that every day, our feelings of anxiety, of fear, will disappear. We will be able to dwell happily in the present moment, and each step will take us into happiness in the present moment, into freedom. That is our daily practice. "Do not pursue the past" is what this means. Sometimes we don't want to go back into the past, but the past grabs hold of us and pulls us back, so we have to organize things carefully, and we have to base our organization on the support of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We have to look directly into the past and smile at it, and say, "You can no longer oppress me. I am free of you." Only the energy of mindfulness, the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, have enough power and strength to help us to be free of the past. We see that the past is just a ghost. We know that the past is a ghost, but we allow the ghost to imprison us. Therefore a practitioner should know how to take hold of the present with the help of the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha and the precepts, in order to come back to the present, and not allow the ghosts of the past to pull us back into the past. "Do not pursue the past," can you hear the Buddha saying that to you?

Do not imagine things and lose yourself in the future. What is the future? Is the future with ghost number two? Why are we so afraid of the future? What is fear? Is fear our plans about things which will happen tomorrow? Or is our fear our projections we have of the future, tomorrow? Maybe this will happen, or that will happen…we project it like that. And that is what makes us afraid. Fear does not naturally come about, fear comes from our thinking. Our thinking that this will happen tomorrow, that will happen tomorrow. Notice the future is something that is not yet there. Because the future is never there-- once it's there it's the present. But the future is a ghost. A very big ghost, which sucks us up, and our fear arises from our projections that tomorrow this will happen, or tomorrow I will be like that. "What will become of me tomorrow?" Our fear is based on that. And the ghosts of the past and the ghosts of the future are two ghosts with great responsibility for taking away our freedom. We are slaves of these two ghosts. What is Mara? Who is Mara? Mara is the past, Mara is the future, those two Maras follow us and condition our life, order us about. We should not allow this to happen, we should not lie under the influence of these two ghosts. We have to have a way of dealing with these two ghosts, and the method is the better way to live alone, the way of living each moment in the present moment, not pursuing the past and not running after the future.

"The past is no longer there. The future has not yet come." That is just logic. We all know the past is just a ghost, why should we be so attached to it? And the future is just a ghost, why do we have to be so afraid of it? There's only one thing, that is the present, but we don't know how to live the present moment, and we allow the past and the future to drown us, to overwhelm us. "The past is no longer there. The future has not yet come." Are there any words in the sutra which are more precise, more concise? No word too many. You should live your daily moments deeply, as they occur: live and know that you are living. Like a flower, you know that it is alive, and you can look at it deeply and you can live with it deeply, and you can see the deep levels of the flower. You live with a smile, you live with

the sunshine. All these things become the objects of your looking deeply. They are your friends in the practice.

The practitioner dwells in stability and freedom, and "dwell" means to live peacefully. The practitioner means someone who has wisdom, it doesn't mean somebody who has just got a degree, or been to the university. Here it means someone who has wisdom, that is, someone who is not carried away by the ghosts of the past, who is not grasped at by the ghosts of the future, someone who knows how to live in a peaceful and joyful way, right in the present moment. That person can sit still, walk at peace, and that person has the essence of peace and freedom within him or her, and that is a wise person. Another way of translating this line is: "the wise person dwells in peace with solidity and freedom." All the teachings of the Buddha that have been given, the Dharma, and the Sangha, are there to help us to live in the present moment. When a monk takes a step, the monk has to practice dwelling peacefully. Each step the monk takes should be solid and free, and the monk is taking steps like the Buddha. When a nun sits down, she should sit solidly, like a mountain, sitting in mindfulness. We are always being carried away by the past and the future, but in the Sangha, everybody is training to practice living in the present moment, so when we live in a Sangha we have the opportunity to do this, to sit solidly. When we eat, we really eat. We have forty-five minutes or an hour to eat, and those are forty-five minutes or an hour of happiness, because we are really there. We are washing our clothes, and that is our practice. Sweeping the floor is our practice, cleaning the toilet is our practice. The main thing about the practice is that we are really there to do these things, and we have the Sangha there supporting us.

"We must be diligent today, to wait until tomorrow is too late." There is only today, let us do the best we can do today. People have given us all the conditions for practicing mindfulness, and yet we don't do it, we say we'll do it tomorrow, we needn't do it today. But tomorrow's too late, because of impermanence. "Death comes unexpectedly, how can we bargain with it?" Then you say to death, "Oh, I haven't had time to practice properly, give me another couple of days." However, we can't bargain like that with death, we cannot make a deal with death. Therefore death becomes something which stimulates us, motivates us, to help us live in solidity and freedom. So when the doctor says, "You have six months left," we can say, "Okay, then I will live that six months properly." And the doctor should say, "I will do the same," because the doctor also does not know how long he will live. So the fact of having to die helps the practitioner know that the days that are left have to be lived properly, solidly, in freedom, with happiness. That is the best way of laying the future for your descendants.

When the doctor says that you have six months left to live, that is a bell of mindfulness for you. We all have six months left to live, or seven months, or ten years, and the Buddha says, "Be diligent today, to wait until tomorrow is too late. Death comes unexpectedly." The person who knows how to live in mindfulness day and night the Buddha calls "the one who knows the better way to live alone." Here they call the Buddha the great muni. So the way to live alone is to live dwelling in mindfulness night and day.

We hear about ghost stories and we are afraid, but we have a tendency to like hearing ghost stories. People say that according to scientists there aren't any ghosts, but clearly there are ghosts: ghosts of the past, ghosts of the future, those two ghosts which we meet every day. When we were children, adults said. "When you meet a ghost make the peace mudra and say, Om, mani, padme hum!" and so we learned that by heart. And one

night we had a dream, and we saw a ghost, and we made the peace mudra and we said, "Om, mani, padme, hum!" but the ghost didn't seem to be afraid at all. The ghost just stayed there. But that kind of ghost we see in a dream is not a bad ghost. The bad ghosts are the ghosts of the past and the future.

The ghosts of the past and future, although they are bad ghosts, if we know how to deal with them, we will never fall under their influence, we only have to smile at them, we only need to breathe and come back to our mindfulness, and the energy of mindfulness helps us to smile and say "Oh, I know you are a ghost", and they can't do anything to hurt us, because in that smile there is the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The reason we are caught by the ghosts of the past and the future is that we don't know that they're ghosts, and the smile to them is the smile of enlightenment. It has mindfulness in it, so we should practice smiling at the ghost of the past, and say, "I know you are the ghost of the past, and that is all you are." And then you are free. The ghost of the future is the same. When we are afraid of the future, we know that the ghost of the future is there. We have to look at that fear, and we have to say, "I know that you're only a ghost." Mara appears many times in our daily life. Every time Mara appears, we have to say, "I know you're Mara." And the Buddha smiles and says that when he sees Mara. In the sutras, Mara is always appearing and all the practitioner needs to do is to smile and say, "I recognize you, I know you are Mara." So whoever knows the practice, knows that the smile of mindfulness towards the Mara of the past or the Mara of the future is the only way to deal with it, and when we smile like that, it shows we have love for ourselves, and we don't make the past or the future an enemy. The past and the future are not our enemies.
Now we are going to read from the beginning of the Discourse on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone:
I heard these words of the Buddha one time when the Lord was staying at the monastery in the Jeta Grove, in the town of Sravasti. He called all the monks to him and instructed them, "bhikkhus!" And the bhikkhus replied, "We are here." The Blessed One taught: "I will teach you what is meant by knowing the better way to live alone. I will begin with an outline of the teaching, and then I will give a detailed explanation. bhikkhus, please listen carefully." "Blessed One, we are listening." The Buddha taught:
We see clearly that the Buddha has a poem here, and the Buddha had composed a poem and he asked the monks to come and listen to him recite the poem that he composed, just like the poem that he gave to the monk, Thera. The Buddha replied to Thera very kindly. He said, "Living alone as you live alone, eating alone, walking alone, sitting alone, they are truly ways of living alone, but they are not the best way of living alone." Buddha thought, "I have to teach him properly." And then Buddha recited this poem:
"Bhikkhus, what is meant by 'pursuing the past?' When someone thinks about the way his body was in the past, the way his feelings were in the past, the way his perceptions were in the past, the way his mental factors were in the past, the way his consciousness was in the past; when he thinks about these things, and his mind is burdened by and attached to these things which belong to the past, then that person is pursuing the past".

Who is that person? That person is all of us. We have all been the victims of the past. We have been wounded in the past. Our body has been treated badly in the past, our feelings have been destroyed in the past, our perceptions have been darkened in the past, our mental factors have been full of sadness and sorrow in the past, and our consciousness has been covered in ignorance in the past. In short, in the past, a person that has form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness, ourselves in the past, has suffered and these experiences, these impressions have been carefully hidden away in the

depths of our unconscious mind. And although we don't want to pursue them, we don't want to remember them, because every time we remember them we suffer, we feel sad, we worry. We think that if the past was like that, how will the future be? So when the ghost of the past comes--it is closely linked to the ghost of the future--we're afraid of the future because our past has been like that. And because our experiences of the past are so sad, we know that if they were revived we would suffer and we would not be able to bear it, so we grit our teeth to get through and do our best to bury all our past experiences deep in our unconscious. Sometimes when we are sleeping they stir around while we are dreaming and come up, and the more we try to repress them the more they try to come up. We have a defense mechanism, which does its best to hide our suffering from us, and to bring about some kind of peace and joy in a superficial way. That is how we manage to continue living. We know there is a bomb, explosives, deep down in our consciousness, but they are covered over by many layers. We have buried them, pushed them down, and in our daily life, although we don't want to think about these things, these things secretly move around and they instruct us in what we should do, force us to do things. When we speak, we want to say something sweet, but we don't say something sweet because something is ordering us from deep down to say something unkind. We want to open our hearts to people, but we can't do it, because we are being ordered around by the sufferings we have concealed deep in our consciousness. So, in the past our body was like that, our feelings like that, our perceptions like that, our mental formations like that, our consciousness like that. When we think about these things, and our mind is burdened by and attached to these things which belong to the past, then we are pursuing the past. Whether a person consciously or unconsciously goes back to the past, that person is still pursuing the past.

First of all, we are wounded by the past, and secondly, whether they are very beautiful experiences or wounds from the past, those things pull us back into the past. Therefore, we have to be aware that if we don't practice we will always be a victim of the Mara of the past. Buddha doesn't mean we have to forget the past, or bury the past, or pretend that the past never happened. That is not what the Buddha means. Why? Because the past has become the present, and if we can live deeply in the present we can transform the past. In the present we have habit energies, very clear habit energies in the present, and when we can recognize those habit energies, and smile at those habit energies, we can free ourselves from those habit energies and transform them. Let me remind you again, we can return to the past in two ways. One is consciously, expressly, and the other is unconsciously, with a ghost pulling us back into the past. At the same time, the method of practice we use, called "dwelling peacefully in the present moment," is not to hide the fact that we are influenced by the past, because all the suffering of the past, all the ignorance and infatuation of the past, is present in this moment. It's present in the form of the present, the way we behave, the way we speak, the way we walk, those things are conditioned by what happened in the past. Therefore we have to live the present moment in order to see clearly what is happening in the present, and when we see that clearly, we can smile at it, and we can transform it.

The Buddha says that the wise person dwells peacefully in the present moment, looking deeply at life in the present moment. There are two ways of living: the first is to be in touch with the wonderful things of life, the things which have the capacity to nourish us; so we live in the present moment in order to be in touch with the wonderful elements which have the capacity to nourish and to heal. And the second way is to live in the present moment in order to look deeply and to be able to see the habits, the customs which are

ordering us around, which are commanding us to say things which we don't want to say, which are ordering us to think the things we don't want to think, ordering us to do the things we don't want to do, because they are destructive to us and to our peace. Only when we dwell peacefully in the present moment can we recognize all this and transform it. And once we transform, then the Mara of the past cannot do anything to harm us. In the past we have suffered, and because of our suffering in the past, we are afraid. That is why in the present we are afraid. There is nothing worthy of being afraid of, yet we're still afraid. That fear is not based on anything—it is just a habit. And because of that habit we have patterns of behavior which bring about moods in which we feel ill at ease, we lose our ease, our feeling of ease. We have to look deeply at life as it is in the present moment and see the face of these things, these habit energies, and we say, "Ah, that is a habit energy; that is something which is stopping me from opening my heart, stopping me from being able to love." And when we are in touch and recognizing it with a smile like that, that habit energy will disappear and the Mara of the past will also be transformed. Therefore, in this section, the Buddha teaches that if we allow ourselves to return to the past, allow the Mara of the past to take hold of us, then we don't have an opportunity to live the present, and we will not be nourished and healed by the wonderful things in the present.

"Bhikkhus, what is meant by 'not pursuing the past?' When someone thinks about the way his body was in the past, his feelings were in the past, his perceptions were in the past, his mental factors were in the past, his consciousness was in the past…" it means that we can think about the past, but we should not allow the past to take hold of us. The Buddha never says we can't think about the past—we have a right to think about the past, to think that in the past that happened to me, my body was like that, my mind was like that, we can think about it, but don't let these things pull you around, or imprison you.

"If he thinks about the way these things were in the past, but his mind is not enslaved by nor attached to these things which belong to the past, then that person is not pursuing the past." Some people think that dwelling peacefully in the present moment means they can only think about the present, they cannot think about the past, but that is not true. If we are able to establish ourselves solidly in the present, we can look deeply at the past and we can be liberated from the past. For example, we tell a story of something that happened to us in the past. There are two ways of telling the story: one, we tell it in such a way that we are wholly taken up, we are held by that story in the past, and we cry like rain falling down and then we cannot help ourselves to escape from that. The other way is that we establish ourselves solidly in the present moment with a brother or sister beside us, and we tell the story of our past for them to hear, and we tell exactly what happened, but we tell it in a very even way, the past does not pull us away so that we cry, tears falling.

We dwell solidly in the present in order to look deeply into the past. We should not say that the practice of mindfulness in Plum Village does not allow you to look at the past. Once we are dwelling solidly in the present, we can look at the past. If we are weak in the practice we need to know how to produce more mindfulness, and have brothers and sisters supporting us in order to be ready to look into the past without being carried away by the past. And that is why the Sangha is important. If you want to look deeply into the past, you should know who is stronger, you or the ghost of the past. If you feel that the ghost of the past is still stronger than you are, you should practice more walking meditation and sitting meditation in order to make yourself stronger, and then have your brothers and sisters sitting near you when you look deeply into the past. So, this is the program, to be

able to face the past. If you live in the Sangha, with people practicing with you, you have a very favorable condition to be able to look deeply into the past.

"Bhikkhus, what is meant by 'losing yourself in the future?' When someone thinks about the way his body will be in the future, the way his feelings will be in the future, the way his perceptions will be in the future, the way his mental factors will be in the future, the way his consciousness will be in the future; when he thinks about these things and his mind is burdened by and daydreaming about these things which belong to the future, then that person is losing himself in the future." And so it is a kind of fear. All these things are Mara, and if Mara of the past or Mara of the future takes hold of you, you are no longer really able to live the present moment. You should know that the Pure Land, the Sukhavati, the Paradise, are only in the present moment, and we lose the Pure Land or Paradise because the ghosts of the past and the future pull us away from the present. An arhat is someone who is able to destroy the Mara of the past and the future. Sadness and fear are names of Mara, of two ghosts, two large ghosts.

(bell)

We should return to the story of the person who is told by the doctor that he has only six months to live. He says, "Okay, I know I will die in six months." But he shouldn't be so sure the doctor is right, because doctors often predict wrongly. Some people are told that they have only six months to live but they live for many years. It depends on the way that we live. All the same, we say, "Okay, from now until I die I am going to live properly, with peace and freedom and solidity, and I'm going to make the quality of my life so much better." And once that person is free, is not caught in the past or the future, is not afraid of the future and can live solidly, free in the present moment, and see deeply what life is about, then that person will see that his or her life span is limitless.

We have read other sutras. We know that sutras such as the Lotus Sutra, the Vajracchedika Sutra, talk about the lifespan of the Buddha as being limitless. The idea of a lifespan--that I was born at that particular moment, that I will die at that particular moment, and my life between those two moments is my lifespan--that is because we don't know how to live solidly and freely in the present moment. If we live solidly and freely in the present moment and look at life deeply, we will discover that our lifespan is limitless, like the lifespan of the Buddha. And the thing which is called birth cannot touch our lives, and death cannot touch our lifespan. We see that there isn't life, birth and death—there are manifestation and latency. We can be in touch with no-birth and no-death, and after six months or sixty years, it doesn't make any difference. When we can be in touch with the birthless and deathless nature, birth and death cannot oppress us anymore. This is what Tue Trung Thuong si said: "The idea of birth and death have oppressed us, but now they cannot touch us any more." And when the doctor says we have six months left to live, or whether he says it's one month or thirty years, it doesn't make any difference, because we are going to live our time with peace and solidity and freedom. And if we can do that we may live longer than the doctor. The doctor may die before we do, because the doctor lives without mindfulness, without peace, without joy, without a Sangha, but we have been woken up by the sound of this bell, and we have decided to live our life with peace, with joy and this life of peace and joy may help us to live longer than the doctor.

"Bhikkhus, what is meant by not losing yourself in the future?' When someone thinks about the way his body will be in the future, the way his feelings will be in the future, the way

his perceptions will be in the future, the way his mental factors will be in the future, the way his consciousness will be in the future, when he thinks about these things but his mind is not burdened by or daydreaming about these things which belong to the future, then he is not losing himself in the future." Dwelling peacefully in the future, we are not afraid. We think that whatever will happen to us in the future, we will not be afraid. We are not afraid of death, because we have lived deeply, we have looked deeply, we have been in touch with the world of no-birth and no-death, and so at that moment we know that this corpse is not us, we do not identify with the body, so we are not afraid. There are people who think of their moment of death, and they suffer, they suffer thinking about leaving their dear ones. And there are others who think about death, and they can smile. Why is that? What is the difference? The difference is that one person is able to live deeply the present moment, and therefore sees the non-birth, non-death nature of life, whereas the other person isn't. So it is because we purposely do not want to think about death that we fear death. We do think about death, and we do it in order to look deeply at it. The practitioner is told that every day they should repeat the Five Remembrances: "I am of the nature to grow old; there is no way to escape growing old. I am of the nature to have ill health; there is no way to escape ill health. I am of the nature to die; there is no way to escape death. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them." The Buddha told us we must practice looking like this every day. Buddha is our doctor. Buddha reminds us of this in order to help us return to the present moment and live deeply in the present moment. And if we can live deeply in the present moment, we will go beyond ideas of old age, death and sickness. We can smile, and if any of these things happen to us we are happy, because this is an opportunity for us to begin anew.

The Fifth Remembrance is "My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground on which I stand." In the sutra we see clearly that living in the present moment does not preclude our thinking about the past or the future, but we must dwell in the present moment so that whenever we look deeply into the past or the future, we are free and we are able to overcome our fears and our sadness concerning these things. Because in the teachings of interbeing, interpenetration, the past makes the future, and the future is made out of the past. Therefore, being in touch with the present, we are already being in touch with the past and the future, but we are not being carried away by the Maras of the past and the future.

Let us read more: "Bhikkhus, what is meant by being swept away by the present? When someone does not study, or learn anything about the Awakened One, or the teachings of love and understanding, or the community that lives in harmony and awareness; when that person knows nothing about the noble teachers and their teachings, and thinks, 'This body is myself; I am this body. These feelings are myself; I am these feelings. This perception is myself; I am this perception. This mental factor is myself; I am this mental factor. This consciousness is myself; I am this consciousness.' Then that person is being swept away by the present." This section is very clear, it is said to explain very clearly what is meant by the two lines:

"Looking deeply at life as it is in the very here and now." When we look deeply at life as it is, we do not think that this body is mine, or say that this body is me. We say when this body isn't there anymore, I'm not there anymore, because thinking like this we are afraid. And thinking like this is what enables the Mara of the past and the future to take hold of us. Therefore living deeply the present moment is to discover the interbeing nature, the

interpenetrating nature of all things, so that we are not ordered around by the ignorant idea of self. We do not think, "I am this body, I am just this body; I am this feeling, I am just this feeling; I am this mental factor, this mental factor is me." When we do not identify ourselves with the body, the feelings, etc., then we are not caught in the idea about a self, and at that point there is no ghost who can influence us, either of the past or the future, because when we can live like that we are already in the world of no-birth and no-death. When we are in touch with that world of no-birth and no-death, we cannot be imprisoned by the past, and the future cannot produce any fear for us. This is the essence, the cream of the Buddha's teachings.

"Bhikkhus, what is meant by not being swept away by the present? When someone studies and learns about the Awakened One, the teachings of love and understanding, and the community that lives in harmony and awareness; when that person knows about noble teachers and their teachings, practices these teachings, and does not think, 'This body is myself; I am this body. These feelings are myself; I am these feelings. This perception is myself; I am this perception. This mental factor is myself; I am this mental factor. This consciousness is myself; I am this consciousness,' then that person is not being swept away by the present.' Just these words, but we can use them the whole of our life—what belongs to our bodies, what belongs to our feelings, our mental formations?—we live them every day, and we see that the causes and conditions which have brought about these things. We see that the body is just body, caused and conditioned, the feelings are feelings, caused and conditioned, and we are no longer caught in these things, and so the past and the future and the present cannot oppress us, cannot order us around.

"Bhikkhus, I have presented the outline and a detailed explanation of knowing the better way to live alone." Thus the Buddha taught, and the Bhikkhus were delighted to put his teachings into practice."

(Sounds of Thay writing) eka means one, vihari means dwelling, and dwelling alone…when we live with a ghost we are not living alone, we are living with another. You are sitting there, you are eating your meal, but you have the ghost sitting alongside of you, therefore you are not living alone. When we see a brother or a sister sitting with a ghost, we have to say, "Who are you sitting with?" and then our brother or sister will wake up. So, don't allow that ghost to oppress you. We have to destroy the ghosts, destroy Mara. In the present we have infatuations, attachments, sadness, projects, and when we live with these things we are not living alone, we are living with the ghosts, and a practitioner should not dwell with ghosts, we should live alone.

[End of Talk]